The New School occupation and the direction of student politics

An interview with Atlee McFellin

Pam C. Nogales C.

THE OCCUPATION OF THE NEW SCHOOL *Graduate Faculty building on 65 5th Ave. began in the late evening on December 17, 2008 and lasted over thirty hours. In the build-up to the action, differences arose respecting the aims and potential effectiveness of an occupation.*

Against both a negotiating committee and concrete demands, a group calling itself the "Autonomous Faction of Non-cooperation Against the Division of Labor," pushed to extend the occupation. On the other side, leaders of the Radical Student Union, such as Atlee McFellin, originally opposed the occupation on the basis that it was uncoordinated, ill-considered, and, therefore, likely to fail. Despite these reservations, in the end RSU members did participate in the occupation in conjuction with the Autonomous Faction and other student groups.

Although the media coverage of the New School occupation portrayed it as a victory for the students (1), most of the demands have yet to be met (2). Not only is McFellin's primary demand for the establishment of a "Socially Responsible Committee" yet to be approved, but many of the administration's concessions have not yet been implemented. The action's long-term significance, however, may be more in the influence it exerts over the direction of student politics. Both student groups and activist networks payed closed attention to the occupation and expressed admiration for it. In the coming months we are likely to see further ramifications of the New School occupation.

This interview which has been edited for publication was conducted on January 15, 2009. It is the first in a series of critical interrogations intending to clarify the politics that propel such activities as the New School occupation and the overall direction of the student movement today.

Pam Nogales: What is your relationship to the new Students for a Democratic Society?

Atlee McFellin: We are still part of SDS, but I don't know for how much longer. We call ourselves the Radical Student Union (RSU). We are also members of United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), and the Student Environmental Action Coalition. There may be other groups that we are affiliated with, like the Responsible Endowments Coalition, but I do not think we are officially part of any others.

PN: Briefly walk me through the brainstorming stage of the New School occupation into the first night in the building.

AM: It started when the New School faculty gave both Robert Millard, treasurer of the board of trustees, and Bob Kerrey, president of the university, their vote of no-confidence. We organized a demonstration outside and inside of the same building as the board of trustees' meeting. After that, other students, mostly graduate students at the New School for Social Research, sent a few e-mails out through various departmental listservs asking for an open meeting to discuss the faculty vote.

There were two meetings before the occupation about how to respond. Apart from the occupation, we talked about the demands we wanted to make and the things we wanted to change in the university. A lot of the discussion was about constituting some type of organization, although most of the people there had no experience organizing, and didn't really want an "organization." They were of the opinion that somehow there was—to use those terrible buzzwords—an organic and egalitarian constitution-making process that was happening at these meetings. Now of course *there wasn't*. And it was not egalitarian, and not really democratic in any sense of the word, and certainly *not* an organization.

In the brainstorming stages of the occupation… well, that was one of the issues, oddly enough, there was no real brainstorming for the occupation. In the two meetings a good amount of contention emerged, and I was clearly on one side because I didn't favor the occupation. It seemed like nothing was planned, nothing was really thought out, and it simply consisted of a bunch of people wanting to get some steam out in a very unconstructive manner—I'm sure that some people are going to be extremely pissed off that I say this, but that is basically what it was.

There was a lot of speculation and skepticism about the effectiveness of any type of action, especially since the bulk of students were going into finals. There were even some of us that had a final during the second meeting. The question of the occupation was much more on the table in the second meeting; two people even premised the invitation to the meeting with "bring your sleeping bags." Nobody did. The plan, put forward by a couple of people, was to actually stay at 65 Fifth Ave. that night, but there were only about six to eight people who were actually willing to go through with it. So myself and a couple of other people talked them out of it, and said "If you are going to do it, at least wait one more day." It was clear that there was no support, there was no outreach done, there was really nothing besides a couple of people deciding that they wanted to do an occupation. It seemed like nothing had been done, and I was very skeptical. We weren't really sure if the occupation was going to happen, even by the end of that meeting.

By 8:00pm the following day, the occupation was on its way. When we all finally sat down in the cafeteria of the New School there was a heated debate about whether we were going to form a negotiating committee and use the demands that we drafted to argue for the changes we articulated at the meetings. Through a deliberating process we were able to compile the changes we wanted to achieve, we took those, typed them, printed them in the basement, and then four of us took them to the security guard and said "these are our demands." The look on his face was quite funny. When he heard us, he replied with something like, "Demands? What?"

Later on, the cafeteria workers, hired by an outside company, Chartwells, would soon have to enter the cafeteria. Were we going to stop the Chartwells workers from coming into work and earning their pay? If we had, we may have lost the justification for the action. Ultimately, it was decided that we would stay, and although we would allow the workers to come in, we wouldn't allow people to buy things from the cafeteria. But then, I think it was Pat Korte and a professor from CUNY that suggested that we find out if Chartwells was unionized; it turned out they were. We got into contact with someone from their union, Unite Here, and we found out that the workers would be compensated and that it was part of their union contract that they couldn't cross a picket line, and that this action constituted a picket line. Truthfully, we kind of lucked out in that regard. If it would have been the case that they weren't unionized and that they were paid by the hour, I am not sure how well it would have gone—certainly media would have been different. Part of the problem the entire time was that even the people who were the most excited and eager hadn't put any thought into how it was actually going down, in fact, they purposely didn't put any forethought into it.

PN: What do you think were the most important of the demands to the administration?

AM: For us at the New School—and this is something the RSU has been working on for a year now— the aim is to force the university to divest from any company that profits from war. Obviously the university doesn't disclose their investments, and I should say that we didn't achieve this demand, oddly enough. The creation of the Socially Responsible Investment committee is the most important of all the demands won in the occupation. It was part of our campaign to bring attention to war profiteering, specifically L-3 Communications, and how we understand what L-3 and its history symbolize in terms of the power dynamics that exist within global capitalism today. We will be working with New York City UFPJ and a variety of other organizations in the "Yes We Can: Beyond War a New Economy is Possible" campaign, established in their national assembly, to help us build a national movement to divest from war profiteers, specifically around Iraq and Afghanistan. My hope is that we can also begin to weaken companies that foster ecological destruction and devastation and companies that sell arms to Israel.

PN: Let's delve into the demand for a Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) committee. The booklet written by the Radical Student Union describes this committee as an advisory body to the Board of Trustees that is supposed to prevent unethical New School investments. Could you say more about this advisory role?

AM: The usage of the word "advisory" implies that this body would *help* the trustees make these decisions, and was used simply to appear more inviting to the president of the university and the board of trustees. However, in the run-up to the creation of the SRI committee at the main trustee meeting in April, we are organizing faculty and staff support so that we can push for veto power over investment decisions. We can only achieve this is if we have the capacity to shut down the university until this demand is met. Now, as unlikely as that sounds, there is a really good chance for this in the spring. The faculty is still very

"Occupation" continues bellow

Occupation, continued from above

much in support of getting rid of President Bob Kerrey and Vice President James Murtha, and we have been making better and stronger relationships with the faculty who have gotten involved.

Moreover, in the present economic crisis the New School is specifically hard pressed to come up with reasonable fiscal solutions, therefore it needs a significant change. For any other university it's different, but for the New School, strange as it sounds, the solution lies in becoming much more radical, for example, divesting from war profiteers and investing in renewable energy manufacturing.

We will be providing this advisory role while at the same time forming something that will allow for us to build a much stronger and forceful anti-war movement. I think that there is a great possibility that we will attain veto power by April. It is extremely important to be able to vote on who the president of the university will be when Kerrey is gone, but I think it is even more important for us to gain veto power over the investment decisions and contracts that the university makes with other corporations.

PN: The informational booklet printed by the Radical Student Union describes the necessity for the SRI committee in the following paragraph,

> "SRI considers both the investor's financial needs and an investment's impact on society. SRI investors encourage corporations to improve their practices on environmental, social, and governmental issues… With SRI, investors can put their money to work to build a more sustainable world while earning competitive returns both today and over time."

This seems to me to say that what the SRI committee is aiming for is a more ethical form of capitalism.

AM: Yes, of course, it's very reformist in that regard. But if you look at the rest of the way we have been framing our campaign, it is much more radical. Keep in mind that in the spring we are going to be creating another group at the New School to appeal to people who aren't going to be responsive to us when we talk about revolution, and overthrowing capitalism, and instituting a much more direct and participatory economy and society. That's why we put that in there, we want to appeal to a variety of people, but our goals—from the beginning—are much more radical.

PN: Do you mean to say that the means toward winning more radical ends have to appeal to present thought, especially in the way that leftists formulate ideas of "progress" and "transformation"? That at the present juncture it is not possible to "sell" revolution to the majority of the population, and that a leftist politics has to take steps toward that goal?

AM: Yes. For some people it may not take these steps, but for most it will.

PN: How do you formulate the interconnectedness between present demands and future goals in your politics?

AM: Look at it this way: There are steps that *can* be taken if we want a much more revolutionary democratic society, and I don't just mean in the political sphere but an abolition of the distinction between the political and the economic—like what Marx and Engels talked about. We are in a university that has an endowment of 200 million dollars, which is not a lot for a university. In this situation there are things that we can do in the short term that will help to create the foundation for a more revolutionary economy and society that is directly democratic—or however you want to describe it.

In light of Obama's economic recovery plan, with its emphasis on the environment, the RSU thinks that the New School should do two things. One, it should invest in renewable energy production; The university should take a portion of its endowment and invest it in democratic, and maybe even worker-owned, global energy production. The other suggestion is that it should invest in cooperative credit unions. This would be a real solution in that it gives people access to credit that would be much more accountable to them than the big three. We should fight for credit unions owned by the people who have their money in them, and which are conceived as part of a long term project of building a more democratic society. Even though it would be a small achievement, it would lay the groundwork for a future economy in the here and now that would challenge the interests determining today's economy.

PN: It seems to me that the link between universities and war profiteering is epiphenomenal of a more deeply entrenched and systemic problem, the perennial reconstitution of capitalism. Thus we are faced with the task of delving deeper into the problem. In the work I've done with SDS members, theorists such as Michael Albert and David Harvey have defined the parameters of this task. Yet, I think that their analyses are insufficient, and despite their influence on students' political activity, the content of leftist politics remains unclear. You proposed creating a society in which investment could be decided on the basis of democratic deliberation, but what that sounds like is making capitalism more tolerable, thus leaving the mechanism through which agency is mediated intact. How is the fight against capital and the ostensible "democratization" of the system differentiated? Are they?

AM: As far as I am concerned—and this of course gets back to David Harvey—is that you can't, at this point, have a democratic form of capitalism. Why? Well what does this crisis signify for the future of global capitalism? What is happening today is leading us into a period of war. I believe that this is the beginning of a much larger period when you will have an unraveling of US hegemony. I think that this period we are heading into is going to be characterized by environmental crisis, and to a lesser extent continual economic crisis, but ultimately it will lead into a political crisis in which the United States will have to deal with rising powers. War mongers, Democrat or Republican, are going to be favoring these developments. That is why part of what we've been doing at the New School is fostering the seed for a new type of economy in the short term while creating an analysis of the relationship between war profiteers and financial institutions.

PN: What should the student movement do to transform the limitations of political consciousness today in order to create a better ground for a revolutionary politics in the future?

AM: I think that the student movement can play a role beyond the transformation of the university while it makes arguments about education in society. I think that it is extremely important to connect with other movements, for example, groups fighting for housing rights and against foreclosures and evictions. Some of us are already involved in this kind of work. We could revolutionize student power by taking this power and working alongside working people, people in neighborhoods against gentrification, as a means to unite people in their struggle.

Some people at the New School are going to respond to responsible investment, but of course I want more. As far as we are concerned, what reasonable person doesn't want more? And that is why having a solid analysis is so key. If we have a solid analysis we can explain why we are trying to take power in the university and move from this question to bigger issues. Who in the short term are we going to take power from? We are trying to take power from the treasurer of the board of trustees. Why? Only because he is a board of trustees member and we don't like those power dynamics? No. That is important, but we are also doing it because he is both the only the non-executive chairman at L-3 Communications, and a former managing director of Lehman Brothers. We are confronting what these corporations represent in the global power dynamic and how they keep people oppressed and in the conditions they are in through debt and loans. The IMF and the World Bank get their money from companies like Lehman Brothers, Bank of America, J.P Morgan, and Citigroup.

People have insipient knowledge of what these financial institutions represent. But do they understand the dynamics of global capital and its relationship to power? Well, it's not that detailed, and I think that this where we come in. Unfortunately, we are privileged, but we can use our privilege to the benefit of other people by connecting the dots, by explaining what foreclosures have to do with the war and suggesting how to challenge that. An occupation is *only* an occupation, that is, when it's not part of a project like creating a democratic university. This is how I understand what you mentioned earlier about the struggle for democracy and the fight against capitalism. We are not perfect, but I don't think we fall into a trap here. I guess you could say I am not cynical.

PN: How do you understand leadership within a movement? What is the role of political leadership?

AM: Leadership is unavoidable and necessary. It's necessary because everybody is going to have different strengths and weaknesses depending on levels of experience. Leaders are essential, as long as they don't hinder the development of a democratically based organizational structure, and as long as they don't impede in the process of others developing their own capacity to be leaders. If they do, then that is a problem. It's a problem because even though those leaders might be effective in the short run, they are going to be ineffectual in building a larger movement. Ultimately they are going to fail to foster leadership to continue the job.

In Eric Fromm's *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, he distinguishes between rational and irrational forms of authority. The example that he uses for the irrational form of authority is the bureaucrats within the democratic process who try to perpetuate their position, their authority, in what happens in the daily life of the organization. Whereas a rational form of leadership is one that, in its operation, seeks to eliminate the need for its authority. The best type of leader is one that does just that: develops leaders that eliminate the need for that initial person. Obviously, a good leader will encourage others to develop their capacities.

PN: How could the new student movement succeed where the old one did not?

AM: Well the old one did not have as well thought out of an analysis. A lot of students that I know of have a stronger analysis of capitalism and a stronger understanding of history than those that were provided in the 1960s. I think that the difference between the student movement of the 1960s and the movement of today is that the first was a generation of people waking up and realizing that the capitalism was something and that the United States was something. But today is different, those who have overcome their cynicism and are part of organizing a better society today are much more in agreement with anti-capitalist sentiment, anti-imperialist sentiment, and can articulate this in a much stronger way than students in the 1960s. An analysis alone is one thing, as part of our efforts it will lead to a much more conscious and revolutionary form of organizing. I think that this approach is potentially more effective—obviously, we have yet to see if it is or not.
I think that as opposed to a lack understanding of the workings of capitalism, one of the biggest barriers today is cynicism: the feeling that very little is possible today.

PN Postscript: *Student politics today prioritizes the need for the democratization of financial structures, the break from transnational corporations, and the creation of transparent decision-making processes. Even at its best— in the struggle for dual-power through local control of factories, credit unions, and institutions—the student movement's imagination is finched in by predetermined and unquestioned political boundaries. The challenging of these boundaries is often left out of the equation.*

Students play a peculiar role in the recreation of social life. While they do not constitute a class in themselves, they are at a point in their development where a serious shift in thought and thus political education can take place. This raises the question: what role could students play in furthering the scope and depth of an anti-capitalist politics and how do we begin this kind of work today? **IP**

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1 See, nyc.indymedia.org, gawker.com, cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com

2 http://www.newschoolinexile.com/files/Kerrey_Letter.pdf

The Platypus Review
STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Taking stock of the multifaceted universe of positions and goals that constitute Left politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that perhaps a deeper commonality underlies this apparent variety: what exists today is built on the desiccated remains of what was once felt to be possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left, and to evaluate their saliency for an emancipatory politics of the present. Doing this work implies a reconsideration of what we mean by "the Left".

This task necessarily begins from what we see as a prevalent feature of the Left today: a general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The editorial board of *The Platypus Review* is motivated by a sense that the very concepts of the "political" and the "Left" have become so inclusive as to be meaningless. The Review seeks to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches to these categories of thought and action—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke productive disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past might be elevated to an ongoing critique that seeks to clarify its object.

The editorial board wishes to provide an ongoing public forum wherein questioning and reconsidering one's own convictions is not seen as a weakness, but as part of the necessary work of building a revolutionary politics. We hope to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying the variety of positions and orientations currently represented on the political Left, in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that do not find a place within existing Left discourses, locally or Internationally. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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Nothing Left to say

A critique of the *Guardian*'s Coverage of the 2008 Mumbai Attacks

Spencer A. Leonard

Deep historical precedents

However sincere its backers or belligerent its enemies, the "War on Terror" is not and cannot become anti-Islamist. This is not because, as some think, there is no Islamist or Taliban-style fascism on the receiving end of America's War on Terror. Far from it. The reason is that the prosecutors of the war are only half committed to the selective elimination of certain religious reactionaries. In consequence, the War on Terror presents the Left with a dilemma: How to respond to apparently anti-fascist imperialism? It is a dilemma that has been faced before, most notably in the experience of World War II. Writing in the Partisan Review after the Allies' "liberation" of French North Africa and the reinstallation of French imperialism there, Leftist intellectual Dwight MacDonald expressed those difficulties as follows:

> A nation fighting the kind of war the French Revolutionary armies fought, or the Red Army in 1919, does all it can to politicize the struggle. It is notable that everything possible is done by [American] leaders to depoliticize this war. . . . Some weeks ago, the Office of War Information issued directives to its propagandists on "the nature of the enemy." [Hitler] was described as a bully, a murderer, a thief, a gangster, etc., but only once in the lengthy document as a fascist. ["The Future of Democratic Values" in The Partisan Reader, 548]

Roosevelt and Churchill's imperialist "anti-fascism" arose as a deliberate propaganda project set to counter that fascist "anti-imperialism" that found fertile soil among Persian, Arab, and Indian nationalists in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia in the 1930s and 40s. Leftists like MacDonald were aware that as in North Africa, the contradictions of the Allied war effort were most starkly revealed in the British struggle to preserve their empire in India. There, the crypto-fascist Subhas Chandra Bose emerged as a leading nationalist, eventually escaping British India and lending military assistance and the prestige of his cause to the fascist Axis. Anticipating such possibilities, Leon Trotsky chose to address the issue in 1939 in "An Open Letter to the Workers of India," in which he warned against imperialist overtures to support a "war . . . waged for principles of 'democracy,' " arguing that by dissolving itself into a liberal-Stalinist popular front, the Left prepared the way for its own marginalization and for the betrayal of the very anti-fascist aims that actuated it to begin with.

Unable to work through its past, the Left today is disoriented. It stumbles about aimlessly while the executors of the War on Terror, their first blush of neo-conservative ideological enthusiasm now dissipated, gradually abandon the rhetoric of "fascism" and "democracy," growing more "pragmatic" day by day. Just as American officers found Vichy French colonial administrators and officers in 1943, American war makers today are discovering the congeniality of the "good Taliban" in Afghanistan and Pakistan, even as they applaud the "moderate elements" in Iraq. As I show in the following review of significant editorials on the Mumbai attacks written by prominent Indian Leftists, and Leftists writing about India, the crisis that MacDonald identified in 1943 remains with us still. Only now it seems that, if the Left could be said to still exist, we would be forced to confess finally that it has not learned the lessons of the failures of the Popular Front against fascism in the 1930s and that it remains the inheritor of Stalinism. Today, as in the 1930s, there prevails a tacit alliance between Islamist fascism and important segments of the Left which actively inhibits the re-emergence of emancipatory politics. Of course, some things have changed. In the 1940s the Left signed up with "anti-fascist" imperialism, in the 2000s the Left tends to keep company with fascist "anti-imperialists." The review of media discourse that follows focuses on pieces appearing in one of the world's most Left-leaning mass-circulation daily newspapers in English today, the Manchester Guardian or simply The Guardian. (1) In examining works from this source, I argue that in their incapacity to isolate and cogently discuss the issues raised by the attacks they exemplify what Platypus terms "the death of the Left." The shortcomings of these pieces are rooted in the Left's inability to honestly face up to its historical circumstances.

9/11 and the Mumbai attacks

In the title of her December 4, 2008 Guardian editorial on the Mumbai attacks, Priyamvada Gopal asserts that "Comparing Mumbai to 9/11 diminishes both tragedies." But even this title is deceitful, since, as her readers soon discover, the piece is not concerned with the particularities of the two events. Nor does the danger of "diminishing" 9/11 give Gopal pause. On the contrary, diminishing and displacing 9/11 from our active preoccupations is her intent. Allowing the November attack on Mumbai to be deemed "India's 9/11" would be, she argues, "to privilege the experience of the United States" and to be complicit with India's "relentless Americanization." 9/11 is either another brand name in McWorld or something even more sinister, an event so "fetishized" as to "sanction endless vengeance," even as it obscures "the experience of millions [elsewhere] who have suffered as much" as those who died or were injured in the attack on the U.S. on that day. 9/11 "legitimized a false war," "created legal abominations," and "strengthened neoconservatism."

While Gopal's piece makes perfunctory mention of the suffering of the victims of 9/11, it says nothing of the actual contours of that event, much less the intentions behind it. The U.S. reaction concerns her more than the attack itself does. Rather than offering any analysis of the event about which she was writing, Gopal strains to change the subject. Presumably the killing spree that took place in Mumbai from November 26th to November 29th 2008 (and has now come to be referred to "11/26"), requires no analysis. But when we actually specify what 9/11 was, can the comparison with it really be so easily avoided?

The crucial point to be made about 9/11 — and the one that Gopal studiously avoids — makes the comparison with the Mumbai attacks inevitable: both were attacks inspired by Islamism on intensely cosmopolitan urban populations with the intention of inflicting the maximum number of casualties. Moreover, like New York, Mumbai is an old colonial port city with a rich if submerged history of radical democratic struggle. Like New York, Mumbai is the commercial and cultural, though not the political, capital of a pluralistic democracy. In short, like New York, Mumbai is one of world's great nerve-centers of contemporary capitalism. Also, the attacks on Mumbai were not on the Hindu chauvinist politics of Bal Thackeray, just as the 9/11 attack was not on the neo-liberalism of Mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg. In both cases, the targets were the profane pleasures of modern society. In both cases, the attacks were made, so to speak, in plain view, so that the fascistic menace was unmistakable (albeit in the absurdly comic form of expressionless young men who might, but for the assault rifles in their hands, be easily mistaken for ravers en route to Goa). Finally, as with 9/11, the regional strategic consequences bound to flow from the Mumbai attacks are profound.

In a certain respect, the semiotics of the attacks in Mumbai were even more ghastly than those of 9/11, since it witnessed the deliberate hunting of Jews qua Jews, especially at the Chabad House, where Jews were subjected to savage beatings before their execution, unlike even the Americans and Britons who were also singled out. For those who planned the attacks killing Jews was a priority and it was executed in the midst of a police siege by killers who had, in all likelihood, never so much as seen a Jewish person before. Though the murderous anti-Semitism on display in Mumbai ought by now to be an all-too-familiar aspect of Islamist ideology, Guardian correspondent Richard Silverstein, like Gopal on the editorial page, declines to acknowledge the obvious. Instead he insists that the attack on Chabad House was "not necessarily anti-Semitic," claiming that the attackers were seeking "redress for crimes against Palestine" ["Why did the Attackers Choose to Attack Chabad House" Guardian 12/4/2008, cf. Alex Stein "Inspiration from India" Guardian 12/4/2008]. From this we may safely conclude that, for Silverstein, anytime a Muslim kills a Jew he need only utter the magic word "Palestine" to have his guilt absolved: Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza means that it is open season on Jews all over the world. In the same vein, William Dalrymple, informs the wised-up readers of the Guardian that "the horrific events have to be seen in the context of. . . the abject failure of the Bush administration" and the "ill-treatment of the people of Kashmir" ["Mumbai Atrocities Highlight Need for a Solution in Kashmir" Guardian 11/30/08]. In Arundhati Roy's column, too, we rely upon the terrorists to tell the truth and to remind "us" of the "things we don't want to talk about any more" ["The Monster in the Mirror," 12/13/08]. It is one thing for a journalist to report the content of authoritarian manifestoes or the

"Nothing Left" continues on page 4

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1 All references to the Guardian are to its online edition.

Afghanistan, internationalism and the Left

An interview with Terry Glavin

Andony Melathopoulos

The following interview was conducted as an email exchange between Andony Melathopoulos and Terry Glavin in December 2008. Terry Glavin is a Canadian journalist, an outspoken critic of the anti-war movement's call to withdrawal foreign troops from Afghanistan and a founder of the Afghanistan Canada Solidarity Committee (afghanistan-canada-solidarity.org).

Andony Melathopoulos: You just returned from a trip to Afghanistan and have been busy writing about your experience in the Canadian news media and, most recently, in an online piece in *Democratiya* ("Afghanistan: A Choice of Comrades," Winter (15), 2008). What are the main points you are trying to convey in your writing?

Terry Glavin: If I'm trying to convey any position of my own about Afghanistan, specifically, it arises from the one firm conviction I have reached in my investigations over the years, which was confirmed over and over again in Afghanistan. And it's this: What we in the "West" say to ourselves about Afghanistan - the way we talk about Afghanistan - really matters. And the implications of the "troops out" position - the spectre that this position might actually succeed, has an enormously corrosive impact on Afghan society.

It's why I'm convinced that the worst threat Afghanistan faces is not the threat of "re-Talibanization" by the theocratic fascists who like to say to the West, "You have all the clocks, but we have all the time." It's from the clock-watching West, and the "international community," which should be saying, unequivocally: "We're staying as long as we're needed and wanted, period. We won't abandon Afghanistan again, ever."

AM: Like you, Fred Halliday and Christopher Hitchens have taken unpopular stands against the anti-war movement. This has been in response to their former comrades in the New Left Review and the Nation for crawling "in bed with the forces of reaction" (Hitchens). Is the Canadian "Left" bedding down with these same forces? Was forming the Afghanistan Canada Solidarity Committee an attempt to provide a positive internationalist response to the anti-war movement?

TG: When the Solidarity Committee came together, we were all in agreement that rather than contribute to an already infantilized conversation, we wanted to try to change the public conversation, and we've seen real successes in doing that. We wanted to provide space for Afghan-Canadian voices, and to make the "progressive" case for engagement in Afghanistan. Our founders were mainly from the left, but we were more than happy to welcome Liberals and even Conservatives, especially of the old "Red Tory" kind. In that way, it's a pretty classic popular-front approach. Our founders included women's rights activists and several left-wing writers and academics, but also a former federal Liberal cabinet minister and two former federal Conservative cabinet ministers. What surprised me, quite frankly, was just how much support there was for the sort of position we were staking out, across the board.

Perhaps less like the U.S, but certainly much like the case in Britain, Canada's "anti-war" movement has indeed crawled into bed with the forces of reaction. I mean this not in some oblique or metaphorical way, but quite specifically. The main "anti-war" organizations in Canada have nurtured fraternal ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, with Hezbollah and Hamas. You can look it up for yourself. When the head of the Canadian Labour Congress refers to the Taliban as the Afghan "resistance" and the New Democratic Party (social democrats) fields "star" candidates who call the Taliban mere "dissidents," you know that something rather unusually toxic is at work.

As for Fred Halliday's analysis, let's remember what his invocation of Spain in the 1930s, in the Afghan context, is about. I don't cite the cause of the international brigades in Spain merely as a spirited call to arms, but rather in the light that Halliday casts on the current situation. Just as Spain served as a proving ground and a crucible of the horrors that were to follow, Afghanistan has provided a training ground and a crucible for a kind of fascism that has been unleashed throughout Central Asia, the Maghreb, and the Levant, to say nothing of the relatively minor horrors it unleashed on New York, Washington, Madrid, and London.

I am offering the observation that history has repeated itself, and is repeating itself, and there is no shortage of isolationist "pacifists" and Little Englanders on the left, and no shortage of Charles Lindberghs, animating the "anti-war" movement today.

AM: How did you first become interested in Afghanistan? Is there a defining moment or incident that drew your attention there?

TG: A few years ago, when I was still writing my column for the Georgia Straight - which claims to be North America's oldest "alternative newsweekly" - I found that the conventional left-wing polemics on the question of Afghanistan simply couldn't be sustained by resort to facts or argument from anything vaguely resembling a working-class, internationalist standpoint. Most importantly, I started talking to Afghan emigres, and to women who had done progressive work in Afghanistan, and soon realized that the entire "Left" argument was, in a word, a fraud.

I dealt with this rather gingerly at first, writing only about the obvious challenges Afghanistan presented in a Canadian context, and relying on Afghan emigres to provide whatever opinions were necessarily asserted in whatever I wrote. But I quickly understood that even in this, I had transgressed into the heretical.

What I began to see quite clearly - and it was the Afghanistan debate that allowed me to see it, was that in the main, the "Left," on such an epochal question - and related as it was to the rising challenge of Islamist barbarism throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia - was simply not on the side of progress, was not on the side of emancipation, was not on the side of "peace", even. Not in the matter of Afghanistan, obviously and certainly. The "Left" had retreated into a sort of parochial isolationism, and there was no role for a journalist like me except to reassure the "Left" of its virtue, assist in the construction of comforting falsehoods, and otherwise engage in the regurgitation of platitudes and pieties.

AM: Clearly the anti-war movement is a different kind of Left than the one you have in mind. Can you tell me a little about where your politics come from? How did you come to the Left in the first place?

TG: When I was a kid I was quite intensely informed by the Irish republican politics in the community, and the Chile solidarity work after Allende was killed, and I was drawn to the Revolutionary Marxist Group and the League for Socialist Action and such Trotskyist groups. But when I got older I noticed it was the old Communist Party warhorses who were always doing the heavy lifting. Not the dizzy ideologues from the universities or the Soviet apologists, but the party's union men and women. You could count on them. For anything. The party was a disgrace, but the partisans were good people. It was like the church in that way. Nobody takes the Pope seriously but when you get in a jam it's the Knights of Columbus you'll be wanting, and they're always there for you. And that's what's really got working people to the point we'd reached by the time I came of age, with all the relative comforts that were available only to the wealthy just a century before.

One of the things you notice about the international volunteers in the Spanish war, for instance, perhaps especially in the enormous Canadian contingent, was a distaste bordering on outright hostility to ideological and party-line considerations, and a searing, gut-felt duty to one's comrades in struggle. The precipice where most people in the world stand today, in so many respects - natural-resource exhaustion, food scarcity and famine, failed states, the implosion of capital markets, entrenched tyranny, slavery, and so on - is no less all-devouring than the abyss the Spanish people faced. Where much of the "Left" appears to be encumbered by a sense of nostalgia or parent-envy, standing in the shadows of its predecessors, I tend to see the conditions humanity faces today as every bit as daunting and terrifying as the conditions faced by our parents' and grandparents' generations, and requiring a stiffness of resolve no less martial. I don't know why we would expect anything less of ourselves today than our predecessors gave of themselves in Spain all those years ago. But the "Left" today calls us to much less. The most charitable thing one can say of the so-called anti-imperialist "Left" is that it summons us to neutrality, to indifference, to the antisocial pathology of "minding our own business."

AM: I am uneasy with the idea that the problems of the "Left" can be solved by simply developing a stomach for getting our hands dirty. Maybe the problems with the "so-called anti-imperialist 'Left' " are not primarily that they lack duty or stomach, but rather, their theory is inadequate, or frozen in the past. Isn't the pragmatism that you deem to be a necessity only so because there is no workers' movement and because there is no theory to navigate even a nascent movement?

TG: I think I might be uneasy with it as well, because developing a stomach for dirty hands alone won't help the Left, and I don't say it will. I'm not in the least bit uneasy about placing a good degree of trust in the basic instincts of ordinary people when they are committed to coming to the aid of their fellow human beings.

I don't know that I simply assign "pragmatism" in the place that I would prefer to see, say, a robust proletarian internationalism, but neither am I certain that a revivified global consciousness needs to wait for a "new" or rearticulated theory, or that any of us need to wait for a revivified democratic-socialist internationalism in order to be able to think clearly or act as effectively as our means allow. At the same time, action without something at least approaching a theory by which to navigate is just as useless. The "anti-globalization" movement might be the most vivid example of such uselessness, although I'm not even sure that its global pow-wow circuit antic-making can be considered "action" except in the symbolic sense. So maybe that's not the best example. The World Social Forum, then. There you go. There was a kind of "theory" that animated its proceedings. Where did that get us?

So rather than simply retreating into theory, maybe the best use intellectuals of the "Left" can make of themselves on this aimless voyage is to strip away and jettison all the ideational-package flotsam from the anti-imperialist, anti-globalization, anti-war, and counterculture "Left", and see if anything remains.

AM: I am sympathetic with your characterisation of the theory of the "Left" as incoherent and its practice as powerless. You don't, however, seem prepared to "jettison" the example of the Canadian volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. Why does this hold a key to a revived internationalism for you? Doesn't the persistence of this

"Afghanistan" continues bellow

Afghanistan, continued from above

historical imagination only prove that the "Left" has never really been able to overcome, or work through, the failed Popular Front tactics of the 1930s? Doesn't this just emphasize how the "Left" is both afraid of taking power and of working for common goals - and by common goals I mean creating a common ideology?

TG: I think I've dealt with the business of "ideology" as far as I'm comfortable in doing, but I am not prepared to simply "jettison" the instructive example of the Canadian volunteers in the Spanish War. I don't know that I'd go so far as to say it holds the "key" to a revived internationalism, but it certainly does set a standard, and a similar popular-front strategy is not doomed to failure at all. In the 1930s, Western armies were not arrayed against Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. Today, the US, NATO and ISAF is in the fight in Afghanistan, and with the exception of the Americans' disgraceful appeasements of the Pakistan military and intelligence complex, the armies of the West are, in fact, on the right side. I really think it's important to acknowledge that, to get over it. The Taliban are not the Vietcong. The Sixties are over. It actually *is* possible for the American military to be on the right side of a struggle, and as some wag said, "It would be lovely if the Nelson Mandela Appreciation Society had the means to take on the job, but until that happens, I'm afraid we're going to have to settle for the 101st Airborne Division."

AM: In your *Democratiya* piece you describe the forthcoming Obama presidency as articulating the words that Afghans want to hear most: "We will not leave you. We will not betray you. We will not abandon you". What is it about Obama's approach that makes you think that the U.S. will finally make a serious sustained effort to rebuild Afghanistan?

TG: America's conduct has been far more callous and filthy and duplicitous and disgraceful and foolish than we have time or space to consider here, and yes, in a perfect world, perhaps Donald Rumsfeld would be brought before an American court, tried before an American judge, and sentenced to spend the rest of his life in an American prison. But we're living in the here and the now, in the real world, and all I have to go on as far as the new American president is concerned is his word. I have no cause to doubt what little he has actually said on the subject because it is in America's interests to proceed as Obama has given the world to believe he will proceed. I haven't heard him say America will "finally make a serious sustained effort to rebuild Afghanistan," in such a direct way. And this is what we do have cause to worry about.

Afghans need to believe they will not be abandoned again. They have to be convinced it is true, otherwise they will have all the fight and the hope drained out of them, and they are already reeling from enough dashed hopes. Look at how it came to pass that America returned to Afghanistan in the autumn months of 2001 and you will see why so many Afghans rejoiced just as we did here in Canada, especially here on the west coast, in December of 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. There was jubilation up and down the coast, and there were bonfires. We celebrated, but not because of the terrible thing that had happened to America, but because after two years allied with the British, fighting the Axis powers in Europe, Canadians knew that at long last, America was in the fight. It had become in American interests to join the fight.

You don't need to consult your Hegel to know that from contingency comes opportunity, and after September 11th, Americans were drawn back into the fight in Afghanistan, and anyone who imagines that this was a bad thing simply hasn't been paying attention, and anyone who would wonder why so many Afghans rejoiced has not been paying attention.

Here's what we have cause to be worried about. It is precisely that President-elect Obama will fulfill his promises to the American people efficiently and cost-effectively by striking some sordid arrangement with the three main chains of command within the Taliban in order to get at al Qaeda. 'Give us al Qaeda and we'll cut you loose,' an Obama White House might well propose. And where is the American Left that could prevent or forestall such a squalid betrayal, or mount even a minor protest rally about it? There is no such American Left. It doesn't exist.

With millions of Afghan refugees fleeing to Iran and Pakistan and Tajikistan, and all the schools shut down and the newspapers and radio stations shuttered and looted, the American "Left" would experience something of a frisson. Noam Chomsky would trace the consistent trajectory of American conduct in the region. Cindy Sheehan would mumble something about maybe not challenging Nancy Pelosi again four years down the road. Amy Goodman conduct some brain numbing interview with Tariq Ali, and in the pages of The Nation, Tom Hayden and Naomi Klein might write opposing essays. Klein could gloat over the front-row view we've all been given of American capitalism's true face revealing itself in Afghanistan. Hayden could take the contrary opinion: No, Obama is one of us, he's bringing the troops home, let's get high.

So, for now at least, we're left with all this "hope" and "change" stuff. For now, it will have to do.

AM: You make a distinction between the intervention in Iraq and the intervention in Afghanistan. You only support the intervention in Afghanistan. Why?

TG: Because the distinctions and differences abound. To be painfully specific, the way I would prefer to put my answer to your question is that I wholeheartedly support "intervention" but not necessarily "the intervention" in Afghanistan, and I would have preferred to at least cautiously support an intervention in Iraq, but certainly not "the intervention" as it was conceived and prosecuted.

In the case of Iraq, I found myself on the "no war" side in a specifically Canadian context, or maybe I should say a not-American context, and for reasons that are different from the main anti-war justifications and arguments abroad in 2003. By this I mean two things.

Firstly, I wouldn't have opposed American intervention owing to any squeamishness at the prospect of Americans coming home in body bags from Fallujah, for instance. After all, why shouldn't they be the bodies of Americans? I know this sounds cold, but if any soldiers had to die in the "liberation" of the Iraqi people, it would be hard to argue, given the history of American complicity with the entrenchment of the Baathist regime, that it should not be American soldiers.

Secondly, in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when the debates and arguments really counted, the nature of the decision facing Canadians was wholly different than the decision facing Americans. For Canadians, the questions were: Why should we sign up as a junior partner in a very risky, largely unilateral war, a war of such a massive scale? Why would we sign up with the Americans in the invasion and overthrow of a UN member state, without a clear UN mandate, with world opinion mainly against the idea? Why would we join in an Anglo-American war on evidence that was at best shaky, for purposes that were at best shadowy, and in the absence of any framework for multilateral consideration about which tyranny to invade in the world, and when, and under what agreed-upon grounds?

Afghanistan is almost a mirror-image opposite of the circumstances and trajectory that have prevailed in Iraq. To begin with, Afghanistan re-entered the public consciousness in 2001 as a thoroughly rogue state, with diplomatic recognition only from the Taliban's sponsor (Pakistan) and the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates (the home states of the deranged oil millionaires who helped bankroll them). Afghanistan's seat at the UN was occupied by the Taliban's arch-enemies, the Northern Alliance. The country had been cleaved in half by war and savagery, and every year, the territory under Taliban control was churning out thousands of Chechen, Filipino, Kashmiri, Algerian and Moroccan jihadists to be dispatched to their assignments around the world from well-funded training camps. A quarter of the population was scattered to the ends of the earth as refugees. Almost a third of the unfortunates who remained in the country were on the verge of starvation. The Taliban were hated by the people, the entire, war-blasted place was a humanitarian disaster of the first order. Deposing the Taliban was going to be like a walk in the park. Intervention? What took you so long? What's not to like?

As I have persisted in noticing, for some years, what the Afghan people have been very clear about in respect of what they actually want, and what the "Left" has been arguing for in the rich countries of the world, are diametrically opposed. What the "Left" has been saying, among other absurd things, is troops out. In a baker's dozen's worth of polls I am aware of, the Afghan people consistently and overwhelmingly say they want democracy, peace, security, and jobs, and they want and need international forces to help them achieve these things. Troops in.

So I am forced to decide. And I've made my decision.

AM: This decision seems an accommodation to the fact that an international Left does not exist. Is the decision for one intervention over another any more a decision than the anti-war movement's "decision" to end either war; are not all these "decisions" ultimately determined by the realities of U.S. power? You suggest multilateral actors (e.g. 39-nation ISAF) and the U.N. are capable of overcoming this reality but this doesn't seem consistent with the example of Afghanistan, where the desired U.N. and multilateral attention occurred only after it was in the U.S.'s interest (i.e. following a direct attack). Moreover, I am unsure why you think that multilateral actors and the U.N. are a desirable counterweight to the U.S. Do you think they are agents of the Left? Do you think they are able to pose a challenge to the present system of global capital? Do you think they are a vehicle for developing a worker-based internationalism that can meaningfully challenge and overcome U.S. power?

TG: I don't think any of these things. But I do think that contingency produces opportunity, you work with the cards you're dealt, and sometimes, history will happen to deal you a decent hand. Helplessness and powerlessness are the worst kinds of illusions, and here's how Afghanistan is not like Spain: we don't need to arm civilian volunteers and get them there. Our soldiers are there already. They're well-trained, and fairly well-paid. In Afghanistan, teaching a single girl how to read her own name is a revolutionary act, and $1,500 in Yankee currency employs a teacher for an entire year. Is the "Left" so bankrupt that it can't even do this?

To more directly answer your question, I would go so far as to suggest that, with some "ifs" engaged, then yes, we could even be deciding which military interventions were necessary and useful to the cause of human progress, and which ones were not. It is quite easy to imagine circumstances like that as being well within the realm of possibility. But in order to wield that degree of influence in democratic societies, it would at least help somewhat if we rededicated ourselves to universal human progress, democratic egalitarianism, and freedom from slavery, misogyny, illiteracy and obscurantism. If these things are possible, then yes, "multilateral actors" and the UN could indeed be "agents of the Left," and even US power could be harnessed in the cause of the historic mission of the Left, and the irrational occupation with overcoming "US power" might be seen for the irrelevant distraction that it usually is.

I will concede to you, and to Platypus, that in order to even imagine such things, it may first be necessary to give in to "the desire for a tabula rasa, for a start from scratch," as the Platypus statement of purpose puts it. I would further concede that this may well require that the living dead of the "Left" as we now know it should be put down, eliminated, rejected, and jettisoned.

Fine by me. Avante. Allons-y. Let's go. **|P**

Nothing Left, continued from page 1

statements terrorists make in the course of an attack; it is quite another matter to rationalize such statements in the manner of Silverstein, Dalrymple, and Roy.

Highlighting the political significance of the attack on Chabad House cannot be allowed to obscure the fact that there was also something quite discriminating about the seemingly more indiscriminate killing of commuters at the Victoria Terminus. It is not enough to say simply that, compared to the foreigners and the rich people at the Taj and Oberoi Hotels, the victims there were poorer, working people, though this is true. It is also worth pointing out that at the train station, the attackers fired directly into crowds. The Muslims among the dead there were not unintended victims. They were punished for living and working in peace in secular democratic India, i.e. of having failed to join the jihad. Of course, the Hindus regarded as pagans were positively marked for slaughter. As for the attacks on Mumbai's elite hotels, likewise, the clear intent was to comingle on their marble floors the blood of dying unbelievers of all sorts — Zionist, Crusader, and Infidel. There again was the same unbridled murderousness that has been a significant feature of previous attacks, such as the 2006 commuter train in Mumbai and the serial bombings earlier in 2008 in Jaipur, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, and Delhi, to name just a few. These rather elementary aspects of the politics behind the Mumbai attacks rarely merit mention in the analysis to be found in the Guardian. But while the "Left" cannot remain at this elementary level of analysis, neither can it afford to ignore the obvious.

While Gopal is right to claim that in many respects 9/11 is not unique as a point of comparison (there have been many other Islamist terrorist attacks besides 9/11), her aim seems not to locate the attacks in an alternative history of recent Islamist terrorism, as, for instance, in relation to the bombing in Pakistan in September of the Islamabad Marriott that killed 53 and injured more than 250. Rather, the Mumbai attacks are treated as have no determinate character whatsoever, Gopal preferring to speak only of a "massacre of defenceless innocents." Presumably the same is true of the bomb detonated December 5th, 2008 in a market outside a Shi'a mosque in Peshawar in which 22 people were killed and more than 90 were wounded.

While 9/11 posed for everyone worldwide the question of modern Islamism, Gopal's editorial reveals once again how the Left continues to rely on its old reflex responses — supposed "anti-imperialism" — to defer any confrontation with the full scope of the barbarism in our time. In this way, the piece tends to obscure or deny what is salient for advancing (or even imagining) a politics genuinely capable of both countering fascism and reconstituting an emancipatory politics in South Asia.

The Pakistan connection

All indications identify the culprit of the Mumbai attacks to be the notorious Pakistani Islamist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba [LeT], a group the CIA and Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence [ISI] founded in the early 1980s to foment jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Beginning in the early 1990s, it shifted focus to Indian Kashmir. It was in one of LeT's Rawalpindi safe houses that the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, was apprehended in 2003. Late the previous year, Pakistani authorities took al-Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah from a LeT safe house in Faisalabad.

LeT is not hidden away in remote tribal areas beyond the reach of the Pakistani state. It recruits, indoctrinates, and trains members for military action in full view of the Pakistani Army, which must, therefore, be said to protect it. And it is worth noting that there is nothing on the Indian side comparable to Pakistan's harboring of such "non-state actors." Of course, the Pakistani government's first reaction to the news of the Mumbai attacks was, as usual, to flatly deny claims that the attackers were Pakistani, or that LeT was involved. But the important investigation of Guardian journalist Saeed Shah helped confound these denials. This he did by finding the one of many villages in Pakistan named Faridkot, where in his statement to the Indian police the sole surviving terrorist, Ajmal Amir Kasab, claimed he was born. To confirm that he had in fact found the attacker's village and that LeT recruiters were indeed active there, Shah spoke to local people. One confirmed the story on condition of anonymity, adding, "We know that boy [caught in Mumbai] is from Faridkot. . . . We knew from the first night [of the attack]. They brainwash our youth about jihad. There are people who do it in this village." [Saeed Shah, "Mumbai Terrorist came from Pakistan, local Villagers Confirm" Guardian 12/7/08]. Given Islamabad's proven mendacity, Washington's opportunism, and Delhi's capacity for evidence-tampering and deception of the public (most notoriously in the botched frame-up of the alleged plotters of the December 13, 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament), Shah's brand of investigative journalism is invaluable. His reports in the Guardian were significant and sound — in stark contrast to the irresponsible commentary we are addressing here.

Though officially denied in Islamabad, there can be no doubt that many in the Pakistani Army and ISI approve and promote LeT's attempts to Islamicize the resistance to India's long-standing military occupation of Kashmir. This collusion between elements inside the Pakistani Army and LeT is inextricably related to the Mumbai attacks. For years the Pakistani military has permitted jihadis fighting in Kashmir free rein to train and recruit in Pakistan creating the milieu from which the Mumbai attacks came. Even if the LeT and the other organizations of Kashmiri and Afghan jihadis which the ISI has created are no longer under their control, it can scarcely disclaim all responsibility for their actions. Moreover, as confirmed by the July 7th 2008 bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul, the ISI is certainly directly engaged in the promotion of the Taliban and the sabotaging of the Karzai government in Afghanistan. We catch a glimpse of such Pakistani army councils when President Asif Ali Zardari, upon being pressed regarding LeT involvement, tellingly exclaims: "Even if these activists are linked to the LeT, who do you think we are fighting?" [quoted in Bernard-Henri Levy, "Let's Give Pakistan the Attention It Deserves" Wall Street Journal 12/3/08]. That is, the resistance to the newly elected government's assertion of its authority over the military (a highly fraught proposition) derives from those elements still promoting a jihadi-based foreign policy.

LeT is chiefly a player in the growth industry that is Islamist terror attacks against India, a country al-Qaeda rightly perceives as a weak link in the Zionist-Crusader-Infidel alliance with which so many of its recent propaganda broadcasts have been preoccupied. While, in knowing tones, area specialists insist on the great significance of the theological distinctions between jihadi groups, bin Laden himself is clear in his reiterated calls for unity. He knows, even if they do not, that there is only one modern jihad and that, in Pakistan, it is bidding for the soul of the Army. As bin Laden's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri (otherwise notorious for his recent slander of Barack Obama as a "House Slave"), stated in his April 2006 message "To the People of Pakistan:"

Musharraf was the primary backer of [America's] ouster of the Islamic Emirate from Kabul. . . As a result of Musharraf's betrayal, Indian intelligence has crept close to the Pakistan-Afghan border. . . [Consequently] the Pakistani Army, with the exit of the Taliban government from Kabul, became a double loser: first, the Pakistani Army lost the strategic depth which Afghanistan, with its highlands and mountains, can offer it in any Pakistani-Indian confrontation. And second, the Pakistani Army's back became exposed to a regime hostile to it and allied with its enemies.

Zawahiri demonstrates perfect familiarity with the "national security" language in which top ISI officers have long rationalized their support for Islamist fascism. The civil war within the Muslim world has long since become a struggle inside the state apparatus of Pakistan. The Army has become so Islamized that its strategic aims are now interchangeably describable in the rhetoric of Clausewitz or of jihad. The Mumbai attacks and LeT's rising prominence also represents a fusion of al-Qaeda's international agenda to long-standing projects of the Pakistani military and ISI.

Reaction in-progress

While it is certainly well for commentators such as Gopal to wish that cool heads should prevail in the Government of India's deliberations regarding its response, her ignoring of the manifestly Islamist character of the attack, the apparent link to LeT, and the internal tensions within the Pakistani state weakens that very plea for moderation and peaceful negotiations. Her commentary leaves unspecified what the purpose of any negotiation might be. After all, it is clear that, as in the past, Pakistan will first try to deny all involvement, then refuse to extradite its citizens to face trial, and, in the end, will release all those it has rounded up under pressure from the U.S. In the course of this response, Pakistan will no doubt take the opportunity to point out the manner in which India has in the past used terror attacks as an occasion to frame inconvenient dissidents and advance repressive purposes. At any rate, it is not clear that Pakistan can be pressured to take on the jihadi groups at all. As Fareed Zakaria's December 8, 2008 CNN interview with former ISI chief Hamid Gul suggests, the institutional culture of Pakistani military intelligence is so completely Islamicized as to permit a senior spokesman to state publicly, on global media, that 9/11 and the Mumbai attacks were "an inside job" perpetrated by the "Zionists and the neo-cons." This is from a man who claimed in 2002 that "jihad has the UN sanction," and who is rumored to have relayed information to the Taliban in advance of U.S. strikes. Given the fact that such opinions can be held by a man in Gul's position, deepest anxieties are not unwarranted. We might add that Gul's conspiracy-mongering is not confined to military circles, but is widely represented in the Pakistani media today [for which see, most recently, Kamal Siddiqi's "Everyone at Fault Except Us" in The News (Islamabad) 12/15/08]. As for Pakistan's bureaucratic and scientific elite, it will do well to remember that the "father" of the country's nuclear program, A. Q. Khan, in February 1984 dismissed concerns about Pakistan's nuclear program as "a figment of the Zionist mind." Three years later, Khan reversed himself to gleefully announce that Pakistan had succeeded in constructing what he called an "Islamic bomb" [Leonard Weiss, "Pakistan: It's Déjà vu all Over Again" Bulletin of Atomic Scientists 60:3 (May/June 2004), 55-56].

Gopal's analysis leaves unspecified a fact crucial for the Left to recognize, that Pakistan is subject to and an exporter of a murderous fascism that goes unopposed by any mass political organization inside the country and which enjoys informal state support. Radical street demonstrations and political organizing in Pakistan have been largely moribund for some decades now, as these have been the near-exclusive domain of reactionary and jingoistic displays, the recent "lawyers' movement" notwithstanding. The little labor organization that once existed in the country is now utterly dispirited and depoliticized. At the same time, given the permanent political crisis in the region, a circumstance to which all the relevant political actors, not least the NATO commanders in Afghanistan, are reconciled, the demand for the reigning-in of fascism, whether "Hindu" or "Muslim," serves only to reinforce the status quo. That is, at present this demand only translates into support for the Indian National Congress or the Pakistan People's Party, political defenders of the wretched cronyism that prevails in both countries.

Nothing, continued from above

While Gopal is not wrong to note the crimes of the Bush administration, neither it nor American imperialism is responsible for the attacks on Mumbai. Nor does a recitation of the sordid history of U.S. support for military dictator General Zia ul-Haq's Islamicization of Pakistan and for the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s fundamentally alter the fact that the jihadis have their own deeply reactionary agenda that is wholly irreconcilable with secular democratic politics in South Asia. (2) In this era of political imbecility, it requires emphasizing that opposition to this ISI-jihadi nexus in Pakistan implies no tempering of the critique of the Hindutvavadis or Hindu fascists in India, nor any diminution of their crimes, such as the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. On the contrary.

At least since the time of Zia, the political order in Pakistan has rested on a despicable alliance between military despotism and Islamicism. This alliance, which has functioned during both civilian and military governments, is responsible for many thousands of corpses of Leftist activists, trade unionists, and intellectuals. Neither the Bush administration nor recent Pakistani leadership, whether that of Musharraf or Zardari, has done anything to disrupt it. Indeed, they are on the side historically of those who perpetrated those crimes. Rather than emphasize this complicity, Gopal reserves her concern for what the Indian government might do. If anything, what we have seen is something that demonstrates the strength of Indian democracy, as with the immediate acceptance of responsibility and resignation by the Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil, Chief Minister of Maharashtra Vilasrao Deshmukh, and Home Minister of Maharashtra R. R. Patil. Her concern to restrain India also sits uneasily with the statements of President Zardari of Pakistan who, writing in the New York Times, seems precisely to pin his hope on leveraging U.S. and Indian pressure to strengthen his hand against the military establishment and the home-grown Islamism that seeks to overthrow his government.

Certainly, recognizing Islamist responsibility and ISI complicity implies no support for the opportunistic use to which the Mumbai attacks be put by India's military and political parties. As its entire long history shows, when the Left evades such facts as ill-suited to its preferred understanding of the political environment, not only does it confess its own helplessness in the face of the present, but threatens in the process to betray — yet again — what should be its own most fundamental commitments.

The possibility of a Left

In urging that the Mumbai attacks are not to be compared to 9/11, Gopal, as we have seen, was not concerned with the actual events themselves so much as the potential Indian response. Instead of strengthening democracy and the struggle against authoritarianism (much less any attempt to criticize and advance the politics of the Left), Gopal proposes something else: "Rather than imitate the US . . . India has the option of turning to its own unique history in seeking an end to the violence." Invoking Gandhi, she declares, "India has no need to cede its unique cultural resources for the derivative language of 9/11." To the same purpose Arundhati Roy relates her recognition that "November isn't September, 2008 isn't 2001, Pakistan isn't Afghanistan and India isn't America." Like Gopal, Roy dismisses as trifling the "war on TV," attempting to insert it into the familiar framework for understanding Hindu-Muslim antagonism in South Asia, that of so-called "communal violence" which she duly attributes to the legacy of British colonial mendacity. If indeed Gopal acknowledges any danger to emanate from Pakistan, she leaves it to the American Empire to sort out. As for the political (as opposed to cultural) resources available to India, Gopal declines to specify which of those is up to the task of opposing the fascism on display on 11/26. Should we inquire as to India's political as opposed to cultural resources, Gopal would offer nothing in reply. But the degeneracy of the Indian left is a rich subject. After all, the Indian Left in recent years has been guilty of active complicity with Islamism as, for instance, in the 2007 expulsion of Bangladeshi asylum seeker, feminist, and critic of Islamism, Taslima Nasreen by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Government of West Bengal.

In the world Guardian writers prefer not to face, the Left is in no position to affect outcomes. Still, acknowledging circumstances and the Left's exhaustion is the only way forward. For, to invert Marx's famous thesis, we will not be in position to change the world, until and unless we understand it. And the crucial conditioning factor of current events is the death of the Left. In the here-and-now, it is clear that the political struggle against Islamism in South Asia, as elsewhere, has a military aspect and that any marginally desirable political outcome will have been brought about at least in part by means of the violence of state action. Moreover, as most Leftists would doubtless be loathe to admit, the very prospect of reconstituting Leftist politics in South Asia rides to no small extent on the ability of the U.S. and NATO to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Left has a stake in historical processes that at present it is powerless to affect.

It has long been evident that with respect to "the war on TV" the scattered fragments of the Left can do little more than watch the bullets fly. However, we might even take some comfort in the fact that, once again in the recent elections, most people in Pakistan rejected the appeal of the religious parties. Despite the prevailing depoliticization, many recognized that they too have stakes in the struggle against Islamism, and did not allow their discontent with the status quo to lead to a reconciliation with it. The Left ought to attend more closely to the dilemma the Pakistani people are forced to negotiate on account of a failed politics, i.e. a choice between two right-wing alternatives. Certainly, as has been shown here, anti-imperialism in our time has become a smokescreen that obscures more than it reveals. It alone offers no way forward. While we cannot contemplate without horror an Islamist victory in Pakistan or Afghanistan or Kashmir. At the same time, it is impossible to imagine its defeat at the hands of such "enemies" as it now faces. That is, in present circumstances the "War on Terror" is no more horrific to contemplate than is the peace to be made with it. If, rather than railing against or rallying on behalf of one or another right-wing politics, the Left would be complicit with neither barbarous war nor rotten peace, it will have to subject itself to searching critical reflection. Though as "a newspaper of record" the Guardian will continue documenting atrocities symptomatically expressive of the ongoing political regression like the attacks on Mumbai, it will do so without the critical awareness that this is what it's doing. **|P**

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2 On this period in Pakistan see, Platypus Historians Group, "The Failure of Pakistan: A Concise History of the Left" in PR 2 (February 2008).

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